

6-8-1999

# Ending Slavery in Sudan

Richard A. Lobban

*Rhode Island College*, [rlobban@ric.edu](mailto:rlobban@ric.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/facultypublications>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

---

## Citation

Lobban, Richard. "Ending Slavery in Sudan." *The Providence Journal*, 8 June 1999.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@ric.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@ric.edu).

# Ending slavery in Sudan

**A**S AMAZING and anachronistic as it may seem, slavery has been revived in the Sudan. The basis of slavery is always in war, whether of classes, races, ethnicities, religious groups, imperial expansion, or the natural "wars" of famine or ecological crisis. Throughout human history, one may define the archaic and degraded position of slaves as "prisoners of war." No one freely volunteers to be a slave; coercion, desperation and violent control are always the root causes.

Thus, the historical abolition of slavery has usually been based upon a slave revolt, or a political economy that makes slavery obsolete in the context of a modern cash economy, or moral outrage about its fundamental inhumanity that leads to manumission or legal emancipation.

First of all, there can be no mistake that slavery is practiced in Sudan. Even in the 1970s, my wife and I witnessed that slavery was present on a small scale. Now slavery has been documented repeatedly by independent observers. The Sudanese civil war has passed into its second decade and has taken slavery to a much higher level. The military government that terms itself as the National Islamic Front (NIF) has sent its own troops and informal militias to engage in warfare in the south. There they attack the cattle camps and villages of the largely Nilotic Dinka and Nuer people. Males are slaughtered as potential or real conscripts of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) resistance. Women and children are taken back north, where they are compelled to convert to Islam from their traditional animism and Christianity, and to work as domestic servants and concubines for those who have purchased them.

It would be a mistake to blame Islam for this practice. Muslims and Christians are allied within the SPLM and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to bring it to an end. The Sudanese conflict is not inherently a matter of religion; it is a matter of a military regime overthrowing Sudanese democracy and covering its crimes under the green flag of Islam.

When this conflict is over, one expects that the successor government will quickly declare official emancipation from what is a fundamental violation of human rights — and a war crime. This situation is far worse than Kosovo in scale, duration and brutality. At least the Kosovars can escape to miserable refugee camps in neighboring countries. But because there are no national interests at stake, or because of racial prejudice, the world wrongly ignores this Sudanese conflict and dismisses it as insoluble.

In recent years, a diverse abolitionist movement has emerged to publicize the issue of slavery in the Sudan. Its religious and humanitarian founders are people with great compassion who deserve much credit for their lone voices and bravery. A strategy that they use has been to raise money to pur-

---

RICHARD A. LOBBAN Jr.

---

chase slaves for \$40 to \$60 each (or two or three goats) depending upon age and gender. Then they are freed in secure regions.

Some criticize this, saying that even humanely motivated purchases may create or expand the market for slaves and thus be counterproductive. I do not believe that there is sufficient evidence to make this case, and one must see that the presence of slaves is a result of the war, not its cause. Moreover, the slaves who are purchased and released represent only a small number in this widespread practice.

The more radical approach, let's call it the Harriet Tubman model, of escorting contraband slaves to freedom on an "Underground Railway" through enemy lines is not a major activity. Nor am I aware of a "John Brown approach" of militant abolition in which slave traders have been attacked at gunpoint and told to hand over their slaves without compensation. As long as the war continues, slaves will be produced and individuals may be freed but the institutional and military basis of slavery will not be changed. This much should be known from our own history.

So we come to the urgency of ending the war and restoring secular democracy to the Sudan. Unlike Iraq or Kosovo, the entire Sudanese opposition is unified under the National Democratic Alliance, which is essentially a broadly based government in exile. It has its own armies and is actively engaged in military operations to overthrow the NIF regime. A victory of the NDA would not only bring an end to this war; it will bring an end to slavery just as much as our bloody civil war truly brought an end to slavery in America.

One wonders why our species often seems to require bloodshed to finally make intelligent and humane choices. Certainly, there are cases of abolition driven by wisdom rather than bullets. Victory for the NDA will bring peace to Africa's largest country and will support the stability of Egypt, an important U.S. ally. The downfall of the NIF will mean that no more misguided American missiles need be directed to "pharmaceutical" plants in Khartoum, where the terrorist Osama bin Laden would be arrested rather than welcomed. It is hard to find more compelling reasons than these are to bring an end to Africa's most protracted case of ethnic cleansing and genocide. American support of the NDA is the real way to restore democracy and end slavery in the modern era.

They do not need our troops, only political and practical support. The risk is small and the return would be very great.

*Richard A. Lobban Jr. is a professor of anthropology and African studies at Rhode Island College and an expert on Sudan.*